

Organic Growth

HONG KONG HAS DISCOVERED A PASSION FOR HEALTHY EATING

By HETA SHAH



Whether it's a wholesome box of Middle Eastern delights from *Mana! Fast Slow Food* (left) or a spread of sumptuous seasonal fare at *Grassroots Pantry* (right), it has become easier to make conscious food choices in Hong Kong.

Hong Kong has firmly established itself as the culinary capital of Asia, with over five dozen Michelin-starred restaurants. However, for a vegetarian, the city's gastronomic offerings can often be too carnivorous and I have been looking for vegetarian-friendly hotspots ever since I moved here four years ago. This search soon turned into an exploration of the trend of new organic food eateries and healthy eating. Over the last few years, Hong Kong has seen an explosion of restaurants claiming to serve food that both tastes good and is environmentally friendly. A growing group of diverse people, from young professionals to stay-at-home moms, students, and eco-buffs, have decided that conscious eating is an essential way to help save the planet.

Among the latest establishments aiming to cater to them is **Grassroots Pantry**, tucked in the unassuming and laidback neighbourhood of Sai Ying Pun. The decor gives it an English country feel. There is an outdoor seating area on a patio lined

with potted plants. White wallpaper with floral patterns, vintage-looking furniture, homey rugs, and an open kitchen make the interiors feel like someone's home. The menu is hand-drawn with the name of each dish accompanied by a pen-and-ink sketch. "We are trying to promote a green lifestyle, raising awareness not only of food but also encouraging people to slow down," says Peggy Chan, founder and chef of the café. "I don't like labels so I say I eat consciously. It's not the idea of vegetarianism that I am trying to promote: it's the awareness of eating consciously."

Chan takes recipes from across the world, and tries to make each dish healthier by adding greens, nuts, and other ingredients. In her version of **Bircher Muesli**, the traditional Swiss breakfast recipe is laced with fresh organic nuts (walnuts, apricots, and almonds) and berries. Their homemade breads, jam, and peanut butter make perfect breakfast accompaniments. I also recommend the **Quinoa Salad**, which is generously lavished with dried fruits and

nuts, and a subtle punch of orange hazelnut dressing. Their **Pumpkin Curry with Brown Rice Pulao** and the **Fig Napoleon**, a light and delectable dessert, are also excellent.

Besides serving nutritious, locally-sourced and homemade plant-based dishes, Grassroots Pantry hosts cooking classes, and conducts workshops on nutrition, holistic lifestyles, raw food, and organic farming.

In the heart of Central, the office district, **Mana! Fast Slow Food** merges the philosophy of the Slow Food Movement with Hong Kong's need for food on the go. It's the brainchild of Bobsy Gaia and Christian Mongendre, a chef trained in France. After establishing two organic restaurants, Bobsy has seen much change in the city's green awareness since he first started in 1992. With **Bookworm Café**, he had to educate consumers about basic concepts like vegan or organic. By the time he opened **Life Café** in 2004, people were ready and hungry for more. "Today, I see huge changes—not only in the marketplace and the increasing demand for a green lifestyle, but more

importantly in sustainability and people's awareness," he says.

Mana! is a happy-hippy place—wood and earthy tones, wall-tables on one side, a little stairway leading to a long communal table, a display of tempting salads, dips, and desserts, and the mouth-watering aroma of freshly-baked breads filtering in through their open kitchen. Everything at Mana! is eco-friendly: there's a water fountain with filtration tanks, second-hand furniture, water-saving toilets, energy-efficient lights, and recycled paper.

Their signature dish is the **Lebanese flatbread**, re-invented in a fast-food avatar. The whole-wheat and gluten-free bread is generously heaped with *za'atar* (a Middle-Eastern spice mixture of sesame seed, thyme, sumac, and sea salt) and filled with healthy goodies such as avocado, mint, tomatoes, halloumi cheese, and grilled tofu. Patrons love their *mezze* platter, with lip-smacking hummus and *babaghannouj*, but leave room for their sin-free vegan desserts.

Alongside establishments serving vegan food are restaurants turning out raw food dishes, which are not heated above 48°C. "A raw and living foods lifestyle allows people to thrive on live food energy by consuming mostly uncooked, whole, and unprocessed plant foods," explains Priscilla Soligo, founder and director of **Rawthentic Food**, which has an online store and conducts cooking classes. "Its popularity is definitely

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enjoying a slow but steady growth in Hong Kong, as we see more raw foods on the menus at conscious cafes and restaurants across the city."

To stock up on organic food I usually head to the **Island East Farmers Market** on Tong Chong Street in Quarry Bay on a Sunday. It has more than 40 stalls selling vegetables, homemade cake and brownies, locally produced honey, and wines, and is abuzz with organic food enthusiasts.

According to Leung Pun Kin, chairman of Organic Farmers' Association, the number of farms growing organic vegetables has quadrupled in the last eight years. This has created room for companies like **Homegrown Foods**, which connects farmers with chefs who seek local produce. Homegrown was started by Todd Darling and Robert Spina in 2009 when they were sourcing fresh, organic, and local produce for their restaurant **Posto Pubblico** (one of the first

restaurants on the organic block). There's also **SpiceBox Organics**, started by yoga and holistic health instructor Punam Chopra, which is a playground for cooking enthusiasts seeking organic Indian spices.

"There is a realisation of what organics has to offer: if you eat organics you do not eat pesticides, irradiated food or genetically modified food," says James Costello, who started a company called **Stephen James Organics**, along with his brother Stephen. They create energy-enhanced packaged foods, like pili nuts (absolutely delicious) and energy bars, which they believe contain that ultimate luxury—good health. ■



Peggy Chan's delectable rendition of Bircher Muesli (top right) uses the freshest produce sourced directly from farms; The increasing demand for organic produce in this densely populated city has led to the creation of rooftop farms such as City Farm (above left); Mana! Fast Slow Food's (above right) quick and healthy options include a range of Lebanese flatbreads with a variety of toppings.

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